

A THANKSGIVING SERMON.

A Sermon preached in Zion Church by Rev. Alfred J. Bray, November 6th, 1879.

"Let the people praise Thee, O God."—PSALM lxxvii. 8.

I am not an advocate for an undue parade of piety at any time. Religious sentiments are too deep and sacred, too intensely of the heart and mind and soul for vulgar show. But there are special times when as individuals and as communities it is right and seemly for us to make public show of our faith in God's unfailing Providence. Ever since I have understood anything intelligently of politics in their relation to ecclesiasticism I have been opposed to the exercise of any control by the State over the Church, but I would not like to shut the State as Government, as the administration of laws, out from all public and official suggestion to the Churches. So I am glad that we have been called upon by the Government of the Dominion to set a day apart for general and public thanksgiving to God for the bountiful harvest we have reaped. It shows that we are possessed of a conscience, that we have a sense of God and of our dependence upon Him for bread and water; we say to all our Government, to all branches of it, to political, to civil, to judicial, for one day let the mill cease to grind, breathe a space, and acknowledge the Supreme Governor and Government of all worlds. It would be quite easy to scoff at this idea as to a day of thanksgiving being appointed by Government, by calling up all the sins real and imaginary of which Government may have been accused, but for my own part, I would prefer to hail with gladness this feeble expression of faith in God. It is not a very strong, nor a very intelligent form of religion that consecrates just one day in the year to giving thanks for a good harvest; it is just as if a man should crowd the grace before and after meals of a year into one prayer. But that one prayer would be better than no prayer at all. Feast days, and fast days, and religious festivals of all kinds denote a state of immaturity in the people upon whom they are enjoined. When they were instituted by Jehovah for the Jews, it was because those Jews were mere children in religion; but for the feast days and fast days, festivals and solemnities, they would have forgotten all about their God and their duty—their great deliverance would soon have become a tradition. By the regular coming of festivals they thought of God; of the obligation which they were under to live right before Him; the conviction that God was their Invisible Ruler was kept alive within them. That was not a very high state of moral sentiment. Still it was a moral sentiment, and although it needed constant reminders, although it had to be forced into consciousness and action by external rites and ceremonies, it was the beginning, the germ of that sublime condition predicted, when no man shall say to his neighbour know the Lord, but when "all shall know Him from the least unto the greatest." So we should rejoice when, for once in the year, Government speaks, saying—"Let all the people praise Thee, O God."

I need not dwell on the greatness of the occasion we have for giving thanks to God. We have had a good, even a bountiful harvest. The skies were favourable, giving sunshine and rain in due proportion, and at the time when needed. No blight came to destroy the half-ripened fruit—no diseases sprang upon it to dash our hopes when they were highest; but promise grew into fulfilment, and the harvest is gathered in. That has been a great gain to this country—to this continent. It has lifted a little that horrible cloud which we had got to call "depression," and out of which come such disasters. We believe that a better day has dawned. After a long period of almost unchequered misfortune, we have the promise of better times. Had the harvest been poor, and not good, it is frightful to imagine what widespread suffering would have resulted. For the abundant supply on this continent has supplied the lack in Europe. A great lack there is, as you know. The crops were spoiled by storms in nearly every great corn-producing country; but, by the beneficent law of adjustment, while they have money to spare for corn, we have corn to spare for money.

It is not a little significant, I think, that we have had to fall back upon this grand old-fashioned idea of looking to harvests for prosperity. For a young country the pursuit of agriculture must be the best possible national policy. It may well be questioned whether in many quarters there has been too much of manufacture and commerce—the old and primitive way of getting a living has got to be considered dull and slow. The world wants excitement in its work—wants to risk something, to be ever playing a game of chance—to have scope for the play and freak of fancy. So commerce has been turned into a huge system of speculation; and manufacture, instead of waiting upon wants, and then ministering to them, is busiest of all in creating wants that wares may be disposed of. The Government we have cannot be charged with the political sins of modesty—but that Government would not, could not be bold enough to call upon the nation to give thanks to God for the changes they have made in the tariff. Whether those changes have wrought us any substantial good, is yet, and will be for some time to come perhaps, a debatable question. The harvest, we are sure, has prospered us in some measure; it has given a new hope to us, and hope means inspiration—so that it is likely enough that there will be a change for the better all along the line of our commercial and industrial affairs. That is the old order—the fruits of the earth first—agriculture first—enough to live upon—then more than enough, and something

to spare for luxuries—then barter—then manufacture. But a people's life has its basis in agriculture—that is the root-soil which must feed and foster everything else that may spring up—that is the ever-running stream under which you must put your mill-wheel if you would have it turn long.

I know how it is that men crowd together into cities so—they are gregarious—they are fond of the stir and bustle of a multitude—there is great fascination in whatever is speculative—man is a gambler by the nature of him; but I do wonder that men do not see and understand more of the attraction there is in the calm busy life which agriculture imposes. I wish in this new country we could foster a love for the quieter and safer work by which bread can be got. When I see so many keeping themselves in respectable beggary—when I see men struggling to live by a miserably small trade, having to cut and carve and manipulate to the verge, and often beyond all that can be called honest—when I see young men hanging about the streets, or imploring for office work—copying, reporting, amateur music engagements, and such like respectable things—I do wonder that the instincts they have—inherited from the first man who was a farmer—and the sense of shame they have, do not suggest work and life in simple but profitable agriculture. There would not be the same excitement of society—there would not be many of the sources of enjoyment and self-culture we have in the city—but, then, so neither would there be the craze we now suffer in business—the constant dread of failure—the ever-deepening fever of avarice, and the constant crash of disappointment on the head and heart. Commerce is a great and noble institution—it is the pioneer as well as the complement of civilization—it brings the scattered and isolated together, holding them in a community—it has its charms—it has its present and ultimate good—but it is not the only way in which a man may live, and live well. Especially now is it full of every sort of danger, mental, moral, spiritual. That great pivotal phrase, around which the world of human life should spin, "I believe you," is put outside of its pale, and general distrust is bred of it. I dread the thought of boys of mine putting all that men can hold sacred in character in so great peril by entering the business life of the world. In agriculture there is less excitement—less chance of making a great fortune perhaps, but also less chance of bankruptcy—less chance of dishonesty ruining the moral nature—less chance of hell.

Since the Government has called upon us to publicly speak our gratitude to the great Giver of all good for the harvest, it may fairly be inferred that Government is fully aware of the great advantage which must accrue to the country from a zealous and prudent promotion of agriculture. I mean now not in degree, but in extent. And I would suggest a way in which that could be done. It is evident that we do not need more manufactures here; we do not need more stores and stalls, any more than we need more, or quite so many, churches and ministers. We want farmers. England has a surplus population, and we have a surplus territory. Each would be the better for a clearance of dead stock—or, if you like it better, non-producing real estate. Government in Great Britain should join Government in Canada to obviate the mutual difficulty. Carrying out the scriptural injunction, "Lie not one to another," but each endeavouring to promote the true interests of the people, great and general good would be the result. Our Government should circulate in Great Britain authentic and authoritative statements upon which those desiring information could rely. Emigration agents command no confidence whatever; they are not trusted at all, and as a rule they get all the trust they deserve. There should be more integrity put into our attempts to people the land. I would say to the Government, Let us try and get a good name for honesty; let us speak of things as they are, not in a way to flatter ourselves and befool other people; not as if every Province is a sort of paradise a little out of repair; not as if a man has merely to poke the prairie a little with the end of his stick to induce full eared corn to heave from the soil; but as it is—room for millions who are willing to rough it at first and to work hard after the roughing it is over,—a land in which industry may fairly expect a fair reward. There is a style of advertising known as puffing; it is usually resorted to by small traders and quack medicine men, and sometimes it is done by men high in political office, and sometimes by men low in Government pay. Give us honesty and we shall prosper; withhold it, and we shall not. Hold out false promises, and you will defeat your own ends; for though many may be attracted at first, speedy disappointment and distrust will drive them away again. Honesty is the best policy in this matter.

Speaking of that leads me to broaden the thought a little. Government has called upon us to raise our hymns of praise to God for His mercies—and we respond—you and I, and multitudes of others. We believe in a national religion; in the glad recognition of God by the people; we are sure that sincere praise is the very essence of religion; that it is the articulation of the deepest, truest sentiment of our human nature; prayer is good, but praise is better; prayer is the wail of a child in pain and want; praise is the hymn of an angel, worshipping before the throne; prayer is the sob of a sinner, but praise is the shout of a saint. And Government has said, "Let the people praise Thee, O God, let all the people praise Thee." A splendid text for a splendid sermon on honesty, and trust in God. There is no work, perhaps, so simple, and that commands such proportioned results as this culture of the soil. There is scope